DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 195 957 CS 005 769

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TITLE Comprehension Instruction or Assessment--What's the Difference?
PUB DATE Dec 80
NOTE 21p.: Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Reading Conference (1st, Sarasota, FL, December 4-6, 1980).

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Comprehension; Content Area Reading; Elementary Education; *Questioning Techniques; *Reading Comprehension; Reading Instruction; *Reading Research; *Research Needs

ABSTRACT

According to Dolores Durkin, reading comprehension instruction can be defined as activities in which the teacher does or says something to help children understand or work out the meaning of more than a single, isolated word. Carol Hodges criticized Durkin's emphasis on direct verbal instruction and broadened the definition to include interrogation after reading, helping with assignments by asking additional questions, and even checking of workbooks by the child and teacher. These data require researchers and practitioners to examine the research literature concerning the efficacy of questioning as an aid to learning. Further, researchers may need to start looking at strategies used for content area reading improvement in an attempt to discover their potential application to general reading comprehension development. Too, researchers need to explore ways of introducing direct verbal instruction prior to interrogation in general comprehension development to examine the merit of reading guides. The lack of eclecticism in comprehension development is what the research by Durkin makes so vividly clear. This lack of eclecticism in reading comprehension instruction could prove as limiting as the lack of eclecticism in decoding strategies if we strive for full development of all the students' comprehension abilities. (HOD)

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Comprehension Instruction or Assessment--

What's the Difference?

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Paper Presented to the

American Reading Conference

Sarasota, Florida

December 4, 1980

Running head: Comprehension Instruction

CS005769

Comprehension Instruction or Assessment--
What's the Difference?

Durkin (1978-1979) has initiated efforts not only to define comprehension instruction and assessment, but also to ascertain whether or not elementary schools provide comprehension instruction as she operationally defined instruction. This stance by Durkin has brought accolades from many and disconcerted grunts from a few. But notwithstanding the fact that an institution as sacred as comprehension questioning has been under review and analysis, the curiosity and interest of reading researchers and practitioners have been piqued in an almost unprecedented way. Weintraub (1978-1979) stated the importance of Durkin's work succinctly. "This report, if heeded by the profession, is destined to have tremendous impact on comprehension instruction" (p. 76). Farr (1978-1979) stated that "Professor Durkin's study has some very interesting conclusions, but if a reader . . . fails to challenge Durkin's definitions, procedures, and conclusions--then the reader has missed the essence of research" (p. 74).

This writer also believes that the very essence of research is becoming involved in the thinking process that a particular study represents, and not necessarily a wholesale delivery of hard facts. This paper will attempt to provide an activity that will seek to have as its result, provocative thinking about important educational issues. This is done with the biased posture that reading research is more of a process than it is a product.

Defining Comprehension Instruction and Assessment

Durkin (1978-1979) rather irreverently sought to define comprehension instruction and assessment in order to examine through classroom observations whether elementary schools provided such instruction. Durkin used components

of reading comprehension listed by Golinkoff (1975-1976) as a basis for her definition. These components include:

Decoding-Identifying individual words

Lexical Access-Having a "meaning for the printed word in semantic memory"

Text Organization-Extracting "meaning from units larger than the single word, such as phrases, sentences, and paragraphs." (p. 633)

Durkin then made perhaps the most significant step since Neil Armstrong eased himself onto the lunar surface when she suggested that comprehension "instruction" can be defined as activities in which the "Teacher does/says something to help children understand or work out the meaning of more than a single, isolated word" (Durkin, 1978-1979, p. 488). She suggested further that comprehension instruction has transfer value in that it helps students understand the meaning of connected text not used in that instruction. Durkin then startled the reading researchers and practitioners by suggesting that comprehension "assessment" involved activities in which the "teacher does/says something in order to learn whether what was read was comprehended" (p. 490).

The distinction that Durkin made between comprehension instruction and assessment is, of course, the sine que non for understanding the current controversy. The following examples give readers an idea of what "teaching" comprehension entails as defined by Durkin.

1. In the context of sentences, the teacher teaches the difference between "and" and "or".

2. Teacher teaches the meaning and importance of key words (each, match, underline, etc.) in written directions by using sample sentences and explanations.

3. With explanations by the teacher, and through the use of sample sentences, the teacher teaches the children that certain words signal sequence (first, before, at the same time, later, meanwhile, etc.).

4. Teacher discusses, explains, or tells the meaning of "main idea" and "supporting detail". Paragraphs are analyzed by the teacher and students. Some of these paragraphs contain a main idea and supporting details. Others contain only a series of details. Comparisons between the two kinds of paragraphs are made by the teacher and students.

Observing Comprehension Instruction

Thirty classrooms were observed in seventeen schools in at least thirteen different school systems for three hundred hours in the state of Illinois. Grades three through six were included since these were the grades that Durkin thought should be stressing comprehension. Reading and Social Studies were observed. Social Studies was observed to determine if teachers taught reading and study skills in the content area.

A request was made to see the "best" teachers. While there is no guarantee that the best were seen, it is likely that the worst were not. Teachers did not permit any research at the beginning or end of school, or during the weeks that preceded Halloween, Thanksgiving, Christmas, and Valentine's Day. What was seen was the "nucleus" of the instructional programs.

Each classroom was visited on three successive days which were scheduled so that all five days of the week would be included with equal frequency by the time the research terminated. This was done to reduce the likelihood that teachers would only be seen on an atypical day. The research began in September and continued until mid-May.

Reading comprehension instruction was observed for 44 minutes in 300 hours. The time was spent on comprehension assessment, writing assignments, and non-instruction. No teacher saw the Social Studies period as a time to help with reading. Study Skills instruction was not observed. According to Durkin, teachers in the study were primarily interrogators and assignment givers.

The influence of workbooks and assignment sheets was overwhelming. These constituted almost the whole of "instructional" programs. In every classroom observed, certain children did the work promptly and business-like. Others did what ever they could to avoid it. It could not be discerned whether a lack of interst or lack of ability accounted for the resistance. What could be identified were the discipline problems and chastisement that ensued.

Providing small classes and teacher aides was not a solution for classrooms studied. The class size average was 23 children. Some had only eleven. In the classrooms that had aides, the teachers had them correcting workbooks. The result was more checking, according to Durkin, not better teaching.

Examining the Definitions of Durkin and Hodges

Hodges (1980) challenged Durkin's definition of comprehension instruction and hypothesized that the introduction of another definition would lead to a much higher estimate of the time teachers devote to comprehension instruction in the schools. Hodges venerated Broudy and Palmer (1965) for having used more "historical exemplars of teaching" (Hodges, 1980, p. 300). Broudy and Palmer had presented a set of phases that occur regardless of the particular style of teaching. These involved:

> preparation for instruction
>
> motivation
>
> presentation of the learning task
>
> inducement of the trial response
>
> correction of the trial response
>
> fixation of the response
>
> test response and evaluation (1965, pp. 9-12)

Notice that the first three of these phases could possibly involve a teacher saying or doing something to aid understanding. The last five phases are usually associated with testing.

Hodges then marched majestically backwards and attempted to apply Principles of Instructional Design by Gagné and Briggs (1974) to reading comprehension instruction. Gagné and Briggs list the following instructional events which were used by Hodges in developing an alternative definition of comprehension instruction.

gaining attention

informing the learner of the objective

stimulating the recall of prerequisite learnings

presenting the stimulus material

providing 'learning guidance'

eliciting the performance

providing feedback about performance correctness

assessing the performance

enhancing retention and transfer (p. 135)

Notice the lack of direct verbal instruction in these "instructional events." Hodges (1980) criticized Durkins' emphasis on direct verbal instruction. Hodges stated that she could only "assume that the teacher must be involved in direct verbal instruction of some kind for the behavior to be considered as comprehension instruction" (p. 300).

Hodges included interrogation after reading, "helping" with assignments by asking additional questions, and even checking of workbooks by the child and teacher in her definition of reading comprehension instruction.

Hodges then took Durkin's data which reported that comprehension instruction represented less than one percent of the observation time in reading, and re-analyzed the data using the alternative definition. The re-analysis of Durkin's data using Hodges' alternative definition of comprehension instruction revealed that 23 percent of the time was spent in comprehension instruction. However, both agreed that direct verbal

instruction by the teacher received the least emphasis, and questioning by the teacher received greatest emphasis.

These data obviously require researchers and practitioners to examine the research literature concerning the efficacy of questioning as an aid to learning. What effect do teacher questions have on comprehension? Do questions help in teaching a student how to comprehend?

Reviewing the Research on Questioning

There are several types of questions reported in the research literature. These include adjunct questions, preposed questions, and postposed questions. Questions inserted into running text are called adjunct questions. Questions placed before a passage are called preposed questions.

Some studies (Frase, 1970; Rothkopf, 1966) have shown that preposed factual questions direct students toward finding answers to specific questions. However, incidental learning and depth of comprehension are affected.

Other studies have suggested that postposed questions assisted students not only in learning and retaining answers to the questions, but in learning additional information in the passage as well (Rothkopf, 1966; Frase, 1967, 1968, 1969; Cohn, 1969). Other researchers have suggested that students, if given time to review, are encouraged by postposed questions to review the assignment for answers to the questions (Heller, 1974; Watts and Anderson, 1971). Yost, Avila, and Vexler (1977) demonstrated that as the complexity of postposed questions to seventh graders

increased, achievement increased. The amount of time spent working on the questions also increased with question complexity.

Rothkopf and Bisbiscos (1967) suggested that adjunct questions placed at the end of a section in a passage assisted students' attention and helped them to read the materials following the questions. However, Singer and Donlan (1980) stated that caution had to be exercised with the use of adjunct questions since they tended to narrow students focus of attention.

Several studies in the research literature have suggested that student-generated questions have a facilitative effect on both immediate and delayed recall (Chodus, Gould, and Rusch, 1977; Rosenthal, Zimmerman, and Durning, 1970). Helfeldt and Lalik (1976) demonstrated that reciprocal student-teacher questioning was found to be superior over teacher questioning alone. Singer and Donlan (1980) suggested that if students imitate their teacher's questioning and formulate their own questions, they have the benefits of both preposed and postposed questions.

This writer would like to suggest that these studies to date regarding questioning have been measuring the effect that testing, formal and informal, has on comprehension. The research data suggest that the testing of students by asking comprehension questions affect later attempts to comprehend. Asking questions does indeed tend to shape the student's behavior, whether done by the teacher or by the students themselves. The data suggest that when students are faced with an evaluative exercise, the subjects attempt to do whatever they must to score well and please the tester.

Applying Content Area Strategies to General Comprehension Instruction

Spache and Spache (1973) state that there h[illegible] thus far been two opposed viewpoints on developing comprehension, and postulate that both have failed to solve the problem.

> One group emphasizes long lists of comprehension skills and the need to develop these. . . . Apparently this group believes answering a lot of questions, time after time, will enable the student to show whatever type or degree of comprehension later reading tasks demand. Another group of experts believes that the answer to comprehension development is to start with students' experiences and interests and exploit them. Actually both groups borrow ideas and training materials from each other and neither really practices what it preaches (p. 558).

This writer agrees with that analysis, but would suggest that the former group of interrogators far outnumber the latter group. The studies by Durkin (1978-1979) and Hodges (1980) support that allegation.

The current practice of using questioning to develop comprehension seems to be supported well by the research data as being an effective way to shape student behavior. That is really not the issue. In this writer's mind, the genuine issue raised by the Durkin study is whether or not direct verbal instruction by the teacher prior to the student's response can become a veritable alternative considering the state of the art. Can we in the field of reading do or say something before we initiate the interrogation that will actually aid the students substantially in their attempts

to comprehend? Can we do more with comprehension skill instruction than start with students' experiences and interests, and/or ask comprehension questions?

This writer would like to introduce the idea that researchers may need to start looking at strategies used for content area reading improvement in an attempt to discover their potential application to general reading comprehension development. These instructional practices, heretofore neglected in general comprehension development, offer interesting possibilities.

Herber (1978) suggests that comprehension questions are assumptive. Herber states:

> If students already are able to identify the significant information, to perceive the relationships in that information so as to formulate related ideas, or to synthesize those ideas with prior knowledge and experience, they already would have the skills which the teacher intended to teach when he or she asked the question (p. 193).

Herber, the research on questioning notwithstanding, then made the interesting statement that "If the students cannot do all this because they lack the skill, then no amount of asking--at whatever rate of frequency--will teach them how to apply the unknown skill" (p. 193).

Herber was looking to the teacher as a possible resource for doing or saying something prior to interrogation that would substantially assist the students in their attempt to comprehend. Herber suggested the radical

idea that guides for different comprehension levels might be made up of declarative statements rather than questions. For example, a student who does not respond independently to questions at the interpretive levels would be provided with a guide of declarative statements. These statements are created by teachers asking themselves interpretive questions similar to the following:

> "What does the author mean by what he says? What conclusions can I draw from this information? What is the author implying, and what inferences can I draw?" As the teachers respond to the questions, they write down the answers as declarative statements (Herber, 1978, p. 195).

These statements are then given to students on reading guides and serve as direct verbal instruction from the teacher. What a refreshing thought to think of inserted declarative statements from the teacher or from basal authors in a basal series serving as direct verbal instruction for the students who need it.

Estes, Mills, and Barron (1969) revealed the efficacy of structured overviews in developing comprehension. A structured overview is nothing more than a brief summary, abstract, or diagram for the content of a story (Singer and Donlan, p. 61). Tierney, Readence, and Dishner (1980) suggested that a structured overview can be presented as a picture, or schematic diagram. Barron (1969) stated that the words in a structured overview assume the form of advance organizers and provide students with cues to the structure subjects. Earle (1969) suggested that structured overviews present

to the students an idea framework designed to show important relationships.

How awesome to think of a basal reading series with a schematic drawing presented before a story in an attempt to use advance organizers with the young readers. It is mind boggling to consider the profundity of change that might occur in student's comprehension if the brief summaries or abstracts of stories used in basal teacher manuals were also duplicated in the students' books. These abstracts have vastly improved the teachers' comprehension of these stories. I think it safe to hypothesize the abstracts would also aid students' comprehension. Of course, a major problem might center around the lack of motivation when abstracts "spill the beans" and teachers could no longer furtively say, "Read the next page and find out why Jimmy couldn't buy the wagon from Mr. Jones."

Glossing has gained renewed popularity recently, particularly in Social Studies and Science textbooks (Singer and Donlan, 1980). "Essentially the gloss is like a teacher accompanying a student through a text" (Singer and Donlan, 1980, p. 56). Glosses are notes written in the margins of texts to serve any content or process purpose. Singer and Donlan suggest the following steps for teachers to follow in writing marginal glosses.

Read through the text, identifying vocabulary or other material to emphasize or clarify.

Write marginal glosses on ditto masters with page numbers and line numbers indicated on the left hand side of the ditto master.

Give dittoed glosses to students who insert them in their texts and refer to them as they read.

Estes and Vaughan (1978) have stated that study guides: develop reading skills rather than assume reading skill; compensate for individual differences rather than ignore individual differences; tend to facilitate teaching and learning rather than testing; and focus on conceptualization instead of recall.

This writer would like to suggest that researchers seeking to explore ways of introducing direct verbal instruction prior to interrogation in general comprehension development need to examine the merit of reading guides.

Herber (1978) spoke of the need for content teachers to illustrate concepts visually for students in order to augment comprehension development. Never has this writer found in the section of the basal reader entitled "Preparation for Reading" a suggestion that the teacher draw to illustrate what happened prior to reading. This certainly should not happen with every story. But if the teacher is to teach the main idea before students are asked to give the main idea, this technique may result in the recognition of more main ideas.

Inferring the Difference

What's the difference in comprehension instruction and comprehension assessment? This writer would like to gingerly assert that the teaching of most things includes four major phases in a suggested order. These phases in rank order include instruction, application, practice, and evaluation. In the initial phase of instruction, the instructor plays the most conspicuous role while the learner plays the least obtrusive role. In this first stage, the instructors prove themselves by doing or saying

something that significantly enhances the possibility of success for the learners during the later phases of application, practice, and evaluation. The process then begins to reverse itself. By the time the evaluation phase (or comprehension assessemnt phase) is encountered, the learner plays the most conspicuous role, with the teacher in the background. Heretofore, comprehension development more exuberantly emphasized the utilization of the last three phases: application, practice, and evaluation. More often than not, application has been the initial phase rather than a corollary of instruction, and not altogether unjustifiably so. The state of the art just now involves questioning of our procedures. A definition of general comprehension instruction will only become an empirical reality after reading researchers have evaluated and chosen techniques that an "instructor" can efficiently and effectively use prior to application, practice and evaluation.

Notwithstanding our lamentations, most of our students are comprehending as evident from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (Gadway and Wilson, 1976). It cannot be disputed that most learners do very well with the typical instructional events that Hodges (1980) lists. Gaining attention, setting objectives, presenting the stimulus, eliciting the performance, and assessing the performance does indeed seem to result in achievement for those who can and do perform. Durkin has not disputed that. However, the National Assessment of Educational Progress and Durkin's data show that many of the students have not performed under these conditions.

The great debate over analytic and synthetic phonic instruction which has now spread over a century has taught us that eclecticism is necessary in choosing instructional strategies for decoding and early reading. A lack of eclecticism in comprehension development is what the research by Durkin makes so vividly clear. The teachers observed used virtually no direct verbal instruction. "This lack of eclecticism in reading comprehension instruction could prove as limiting as the lack of eclecticism in decoding strategies if we strive for full development of all the students' comprehension abilities" (Cloer, 1980, p. 567).

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